DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 260 458 CS 209 287

AUTHOR Clinton, DeWitt
TITLE Teaching Audience.
PUB DATE Mar 85
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (36th, Minneapolis, MN, March 21-23, 1985).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Analysis; Higher Education; *Student Motivation; Writing (Composition); *Writing for Publication; *Writing Improvement; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Audience Awareness

ABSTRACT

One way in which a sense of audience awareness was fostered in students in college composition classes was by creating an exercise designed to challenge them. Rather than simply writing essays to be read by the teacher, the students were guided in selecting publications that might accept and publish their articles. Although most students received letters of rejection, two students did receive acceptances. When students were asked to evaluate the exercise at the end of the semester, nearly all of the students identified how much more enjoyable it was to compose an assignment when a particular audience was addressed. Although the assignment offers risk and is far from perfect, the benefits of the exercise seem to outweigh the risks. (DF)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

DeWitt Clinton

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED260458

TEACHING AUDIENCE

DeWitt Clinton
UW-Whitewater
Whitewater WI 53190

When given the opportunity to teach a section of Honors English at the University of Wisconsin--Whitewater, I wanted to create a special challenge to these already highly motivated students. The results were benefits for both my students as well as myself. The students learned that writing in the university could be read by someone else other than an English prof, and I learned of a special, and I think unique way of teaching the concept of audience.

Audience, or teaching the principal of audience, is what I want to share with you today. The method is easy. The results are especially rewarding.

When I first raised the term audience, the first remark from a very worried student was "Audience? You mean we're going to perform our essays?"

"No," I said, "not perform--but rather, we're going to learn how to get our views and opinions into the hands of readers. Who <u>is</u> genuinely interested in reading your

CS 209387

work, outside this university? Maybe we can start thinking of our readers as readers of specialized publications rather than English teachers."

At this point, the class confirmed that they had never realized the potential for writing to an "audience." All they knew was how to figure out the needs, and whims, of a high school English teacher.

How I framed the question was something like this: Would you be interested in writing for fame and fortune, or to an English teacher? They all voted for fame and fortune. But they also showed signs of agitation. A few looked nervous--frowns, lost eye contact. They probably wondered if this isn't what Honors meant at our university. They knew I was up to something different, but they were all unfamiliar with the terminology.

Question: "You mean we have to send our assignments out to Reader's Digest, or Seventeen? That incredible! I've never written for anybody in my whole life."

"What happens if we can't sell our work?"

"What's the pay?"

I knew editorial rejection was a considerable reality, yet

I thought I had, pardon the expression, a gimmick that would help students learn to write for real-world audiences, communicating to a particular group of people, small or large, so they could better feel a solid relationship between themselves as writers and "real people" as readers. What I wanted was to never again read a canned essay. I thought this gimmick might work.

In our first conversations, we started exploring who would be interested in what we wrote. A number of students identified magazines with "youth oriented" audiences, as they put it. Unbelievably, on this first day, everyone, everyone agreed that everyone their age (18) read Reader's Digest.

I cracked up. But I also tried to keep a straight face. I asked them to consider any other magazines they "might" have read. Someone then mentioned Teen. Another suggested her high school newspaper. Another our own college newspaper, The Royal Purple. Area newspapers, county newspapers, Farm Digest (as a number of our Wisconsin students come from farming communities), Sports Illustrated--and then the list became much more realistic, beyond the first limitations of Reader's Digest.

We agreed, as a class, that we would not send our finished articles, but rather, we would send out "query letters" to see if editors (from Sports Illustrated, to hometown newspapers, to the Editorial Section of the Milwaukee Journal) were interested in publishing their "articles."

They asked for names and addresses. I directed them to Writer's Digest, not Reader's Digest, the library periodicals and newspaper section. They asked what's a query letter? At first I told them to just compose an introduction to a busy editor. After one week, we then agreed on what we should all try to communicate in our query letters:

[Incidentally, while composing their audience-oriented essay, they were asked to read several issues of the journal they hoped to "write for."]

1. They advised the editor of the similarity between their essay and recently published articles in that particular journal.

2. They offered a brief outline of their article.

3. They presented either a catchy introduction, or a significant, or most important paragraph of the essay.

4. They closed with a request for a speedy response, as we did not want to get letters back in six months.
5. And they enclosed something they had never heard of before, an SSAE.

In addition, to present themselves as professionals, they were asked NOT to point out to the editors that this submission was part of an Honors English class at a state university. So I told them to use their home addresses, not their university or campus addresses.

Surprisingly, the students felt more at ease with their new assignment when they realized their essay "meant something"--that it was not limited to "my eyes only"; a few even thought they could actually change someone's opinion--if only someone besides a teacher could read it.

As weeks passed, we received A LOT of quick and speedy rejection letters. Some were even form letters which were even more of a "downer." I had considered this negative aspect of the assignment, but what I hadn't considered was the disappointment of the students after they had tried so hard to write for a real audience.

But two students, one from my Honors class, and one from a regular section of College English, did see acceptances.

Kim Huibregtse offered to her high school newspaper advice from a high school graduate on what to look for in a high school senior "college campus tour." The essay worked successfully as a detailed, seven step how-to or process essay, written to a very specific audience, one Kim was quite familiar with.

Here's her opening statement:

> Long hours of examination and plenty of foot-work have finally ended in the selection of the college best fitted for your needs. You're all done now, right? Wrong. The time has come for one final visit to your new school to answer any last minute questions. A few small tips will give you an idea of what questions to ask to save time, money and energy before your college adventure.

A second student, Steve Davis, an individual with a knack for humor, wrote a "light entertainment" about a serious campus problem--long distance phone bills. After developing a dramatic narrative expecting Ma Bell's "letter," he wrote, midway in his essay,"'Reach out and touch someone,' the ad says. Well, Ma Bell had just reached out and touched

me with a bill the size of our national debt." The last third of his essay offered ways of reducing the "national debt" using an egg-timer and stamps.

I admit that for the rest of the class, success was limited to excellent audience-oriented writing which merited "A" grades. I couldn't and didn't want to write to each editor and plead for acceptance. I did want them to see that even if they wrote for a real audience, and wrote at their best level, there were others writing too. The field was competitive. Quite a different experience than writing to a teacher and having that teacher accept the student's work automatically, no matter what condition it is in.

At the end of the semester, I asked the students to evaluate the exercise. Nearly all of the students identified, in varying ways, <u>how much more enjoyable</u> it was to compose an assignment when a particular audience is addressed.

One student, Ann , gave me a fairly detailed reaction:

> When writing my essays, I tried to picture it in a magazine.
>
> Until we sent articles out to various editors, I had no sense of audience. I simply wrote

> assignments that remained inside the four walls of the English classroom. I've found that writing to an audience is much more pleasing for the writer. Having that specific goal in mind, I can now actually write to someone specific.
>
> It seemed so exciting that I was actually entering what someone might call a 'professional writing' world.

Another student, Mark Vanderpool, who wrote at the A level all through the semester, reminded me of the frustration he felt in the "professional world of writers."

> While the concept of seeking publication as a class requirement added a real-life dimension to our required writing, it also added a good deal of frustration. We were forced to consider such concepts as audience, purpose and clarity as they would apply to professional writing; however, we are not professional writers and we realize that not everything we write is suitable for publication. It is tough enough for the professionals to get their writings published.

So even though an assignment may be challenging, no matter how well the students write their audience-oriented essays and query letters, expect a high number of rejection slips, and prepare the student for that reality. In the meantime, help the student find more accessible publications, and don't forget their high school newspapers, your campus newspaper, hometown newspapers, and metro newspapers with opinion columns.

So the assignment offers risk, and it's far from perfect, or ideal, but if you feel you've read your last canned essay and you can't, and won't, read one more, then I suggest you drop by your corner drug store, pick up a copy of Writer's Digest, not Reader's Digest, look for those editors who are interested in unsolicited essays, and begin exploring with your students the possibilities of "real-world" writing.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE